

A jaundiced set of values

There are fewer more awesome moments in a person's life than a visit to the dentist. The thought of sitting in that chair at the mercy of someone probing the mouth with forceps or a drill is enough to unnerve the bravest.

And the knowledge that 42 per cent of Hongkong's dentists do not have university qualifications is unlikely to salve those fears.

Even more frightening is the realisation that the Medical and Health Department actively supports these unqualified dentists.

A spokesman for the department this week brushed aside criticisms of this practice with the bland statement that "the Dental Council of Hongkong is satisfied with their standard of practice or they would not have been registered."

The spokesman was quick to point out that the 216 unqualified dentists were diminishing in numbers annually as only those with university qualifications had been added to the registry since 1940. This would indicate that the department will be pleased to see the last of them.

But it is still very reluctant to prosecute the hordes of back-street dentists.

Obviously the Medical and Health Department has two sets of standards: One for unqualified dentists and one for "unqualified" doctors.

The department has long been marking time on a decision to allow China-trained doctors to practise here.

Yet these doctors do have academic qualifications — which is more than the 216 dentists who operate here with the department's blessing can claim.

Besides lacking university training, these dentists also are renowned for charging exorbitant fees.

Allegations in the past that these dentists leave roots behind, put in crowns and bridges with ledges, and use cheap imitation plastic crowns while telling the patient they are getting porcelain have never been refuted.

Lack of professional training means that their knowledge is inadequate, especially when it comes to restoration and filling work.

Properly trained dentists are forever complaining about the poor dental attention that many of their new patients have had in the past.

They give examples of infection caused by improper and insufficient sterilisation, broken roots due to unsteady hands, post-operative bleeding causing serious side effects due to the use of low quality, cheap drugs for anaesthetic purposes.

The root of the whole problem is the acute shortage of dentists in Hongkong.

It is believed that 60 per cent of the 513 locally registered doctors are nearing retirement age.

Although the Colony is turning out 150 doctors each year there are no locally trained dentists. It is the only place in Asia without a dental school.

The University of Hongkong as recently as last month said it was keen to establish a dental school but blamed the Government for gumming up the project.

The Medical White Paper released in July, in fact, provides for a dental school with a target date of 1984.

That is a long way off. This would seem to be one priority the Government could well afford to get its teeth into.